

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of Geography  
REPORT**

**Abbey Vocational School  
Donegal, County Donegal  
Roll number: 71180F**

**Date of inspection: 7 October 2010**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT  
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Abbey Vocational School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Geography and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, the deputy principal and almost all of the subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

**SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT**

Abbey Vocational School is a co-educational school under the trusteeship of County Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC). The school offers the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), the Applied Leaving Certificate (LCA) and a number of Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses. Current enrolment is 764 students, 379 boys and 385 girls.

School management very effectively supports the work of the geography teaching team. Teachers have been assigned base classrooms, three of which are specialist geography rooms, where a wide range of resources is available to support teaching and learning. An inventory of these resources is included in the subject department plan. Information and communications technology (ICT) has been provided to teachers including laptop computers and data projectors, an interactive whiteboard and visualisers. There are plans to further increase ICT as resources become available. Teachers are encouraged to share their teaching resources by developing a shared folder on the school's intranet.

Seven teachers deliver the planned teaching programme for Geography in Abbey Vocational School, and most are subject specialists. They form a clearly identifiable subject department within the school. Teachers have availed of continuing professional development (CPD) in relation to Geography and some have registered with the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in relation to *Scoilnet Maps*. All teachers are encouraged to register with NCTE and to use this valuable teaching resource.

In line with good practice Geography has become part of the core junior-cycle curriculum in the school. At senior level a module on Environmental and Social Studies provides students taking the optional TY with a geographical dimension to their studies. Geography is an optional subject

for the established Leaving Certificate. Students are provided with an open choice of subjects before option bands are generated. This is good practice. The uptake of the subject is in a healthy state reflecting the positive experiences of students during the junior cycle. Time allocation for the subject across programmes is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across students' timetables. Students are taught in mixed-ability class settings.

Teachers are made aware of students with additional educational needs and contacts are maintained between the geography teachers and the learning support department. The geography teachers are encouraged to provide lists of key words to the learning support teachers and to keep them informed of revision plans for the subject. Special needs assistants were present in a number of the lessons observed and they provided an appropriate level of support to students.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Documentation provided during the evaluation indicated that teachers have been working collaboratively for a number of years. This collaboration has resulted in the completion of a comprehensive long-term curriculum plan for Geography. Teachers also work together to set common tests, to plan for the geographical investigation for the established Leaving Certificate, to develop an assessment policy for the subject and to share resources. A positive and collegial relationship was evident amongst the geography teaching team with one teacher acting as subject co-ordinator. Formal planning time is provided by school management once per term and minutes of meetings are included in the subject department plan. It is suggested that teachers use some of the time provided for formal planning to discuss teaching and learning and to share their considerable professional expertise. Ongoing discussions take place between the members of the geography department.

There was evidence in subject department minutes that the subject plan has been monitored and reviewed. The subject plan begins with a mission statement for the department and deals with a range of organisational matters. A long-term curriculum plan is in place for each year group. The junior-cycle plans are presented using a number of headings including key ideas, topic, setting, textbook reference and assessment. Timeframes for the completion of sections of the programme are also indicated. While a similar format is used for the senior cycle the plans here include reference to learning outcomes. It is recommended that in reviewing the long-term curriculum plan the focus should be on identifying learning outcomes and then linking these to curriculum topics, timeframes, resources, teaching methods, and assessment. This approach will put the student at the centre of the planning process and will be in line with guidelines from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

The first-year teaching plan includes reference to the development of Ordnance Survey (OS) map skills and includes topics from both physical and human geography. This is good practice. However, there is a significant emphasis on topics from physical geography in the early part of the plan. This poses a significant challenge for students, at this early stage, in terms of technical vocabulary and understanding complex geomorphic processes. It is recommended that the planned teaching programme for first-year students should be reviewed. Consideration should be given to including the study of large-scale OS maps and photographs of the local area early in the planned teaching programme. Consideration should also be given to including topics from Section C of the Junior Certificate Syllabus: Economic Activities as a means of introducing greater variety. In planning the teaching programme care should be taken to ensure that the order

in which topics are presented results in an incremental approach to learning, for example a study of the use of weather instruments and weather recording will provide a sound basis on which to study climatic regions and for students to understand the concept of mean monthly temperatures.

Individual teachers had prepared very well for the lessons observed. It was evident that the lessons observed were part of a larger unit of study and lessons had clear aims. Teachers had prepared, in most cases, a range of resources which were effectively used to support teaching and learning. These resources included *Google Earth*, DVDs, worksheets, cloze tests, lists of key words, the interactive whiteboard and OS maps. ICT was very effectively used in some lessons and made a significant contribution to maintaining students' interest and in facilitating their understanding of geographic concepts and the scale of geographic phenomena. The agreed subject department plan is being followed by all teachers.

A written plan for the TY module in Environmental and Social Studies was provided. This plan, set out in a number of units, includes reference to both content and to the development of students' geographic skills and includes a number of out of class learning activities. It is a broad programme of study and deals with a number of topical issues, such as waste management and sustainable development. There is scope to review this programme and the following considerations should be taken into account. A clear distinction needs to be maintained between the TY programme and the established Leaving Certificate both in terms of content and teaching strategies. The programme should provide a new and exciting area of study for students. Skills development and enhancement could be accomplished in the completion of a geographical investigation rather than as a stand alone unit of study as it appears at present.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Classroom management was very effective in all of the lessons observed. Clear routines are in place and this creates a secure environment which facilitates teaching and learning. Lessons began with roll call, homework was corrected and monitored and this set the scene for the introduction of new subject matter. Lessons concluded with homework being assigned and this was recorded by students in their journals. A positive, mutually respectful and affirming classroom atmosphere was evident in the classrooms visited. It was evident that students were enjoying their study of Geography. Students were encouraged to ask questions and to contribute to discussions and they responded appropriately.

In all classrooms visited there were displays of maps and photographs. In some classrooms the display of students' projects and particularly the display, in one classroom, of the geographical investigations undertaken by students preparing for the Leaving Certificate over the last three years created a visually stimulating environment. It is notable that the teachers collaborate in preparing for the geographical investigation, that the topic chosen varies from year to year and that the local environment is used. In some classrooms the good practice was evident of a display of weather instruments that were appropriately labelled. The use of a GeoNews notice board in classrooms could be used to display photographs and articles from the print media and this would help to establish a link between the study of Geography and the world outside the classroom.

Some very high-quality teaching was evident in the classrooms visited, a notable feature of which was the effective use of ICT to stimulate students' interest and to engage them in the learning process. It was evident in all of the lessons observed that the teachers had clear aims for teaching and learning. Student motivation and achievement can be enhanced where teachers establish clear

and precise learning outcomes for each lesson. These learning outcomes should be shared with students at the start of lessons, as well as being written on the whiteboard, and ticked off when achieved. They would also facilitate review at the conclusion of lessons.

Best practice was observed when teachers used a variety of strategies to engage students in the learning process. Such strategies included a good balance between teacher input, teacher-student interaction and the completion of short student tasks individually or in pairs or small groups. In one lesson observed students viewed a short DVD clip of a volcanic eruption which was most appropriate in clarifying the magnitude of pyroclastic eruptions. Prior to the viewing students were provided with a set of questions which stimulated their interest. These questions were answered during viewing and formed the basis for discussion and elaboration of the topic in a whole-class setting. This approach maximised the learning potential of such teaching stimuli.

In another lesson the use of a short animation showing the operation and effects of freeze-thaw action was very effective in facilitating students' understanding. The use of the interactive whiteboard and *Google Earth* in another lesson created a stimulating way to discuss models of urban land-use. Students and teachers engaged in question and answer sessions where ideas and examples were highlighted.

In many of the lessons there was good reference to students' personal experiences and to local examples and this is good practice. Brainstorming was also used to garner students' prior knowledge and group work facilitated collaborative learning and provided variety in the teaching strategy in some lessons. The non-traditional seating arrangement in one classroom facilitated a greater degree of collaborative learning. Teacher exposition in all lessons was clear and lessons were appropriately paced. Teaching was less effective when there was an over reliance on the textbook or where teacher input was the main medium of instruction. For example, it is more effective if the operation of geomorphic processes is explained using diagrams drawn on the whiteboard than for the teacher to read the textbook and explain.

There was an appropriate focus on skills development in a number of lessons observed. OS maps, aerial photographs and satellite images were used to develop students' skills. Group and pair work encouraged students to develop their communication and social skills. Teachers frequently moved around the classrooms offering support and advice to students as they worked to complete set tasks. In some lessons students were encouraged to develop higher-order thinking skills, particularly to develop critical thinking and information interpretation by the questioning strategies used by teachers.

Differentiation was evident in the teaching strategies used in some lessons. In one lesson as students worked on a cloze worksheet they were offered a list of key words to support them in this task. Teachers moved around the classrooms and as students worked on set tasks where appropriate one to one tuition was provided. The teaching of key words and their display in some classrooms further supported students' literacy development. There is further scope to display and develop the use of a key word strategy and support materials provided during the evaluation will facilitate this.

Students are making very good progress in their courses. They displayed a good grasp of both the subject content and geographical skills. Students expressed their views, sought clarification when needed and willingly participated in the planned learning activities. The completion of homework and work in students' copybooks also indicated that students are making good progress in their study of Geography.

## ASSESSMENT

Abbey Vocational School has arrangements in place for the formal assessment of students' progress in October, before Christmas and at the end of the school year. Pre-examinations for students in third and fifth year are held during the second term. It is notable that parents receive written reports following these formal assessments. The good practice of setting common tests across year groups is in place. Samples of these common assessment papers provided during the evaluation showed that students are provided with data response questions and are also required to write extended answers. This is good practice. The uptake of the higher level by students in the certificate examinations is very satisfactory and students are achieving well in these examinations.

Teachers assess students' progress in a number of ways and an assessment policy for Geography is in place. Homework is regularly assigned, monitored and corrected. In some instances there is scope to provide more creative forms for homework, such as crosswords or word searches, rather than simply copy notes or diagrams from textbooks. Class tests are held when sections of the planned teaching programme are completed. Teachers maintain records of attendance, homework and class tests. These records are used to inform discussions at formal parent-teacher meetings which are held annually for each year group.

Students maintain good records of their work. Written work is kept in a logical order, neatly presented and diagrams are accurately drawn. This was evident in a selection of copybooks viewed during the evaluation. Teachers set high standards for this work and provide advice and support for students. The members of the geography department have begun to use assessment for learning principles in providing feedback to students on their written work. This is an important means of improving students' answering technique and of encouraging them to be more personally responsible for their own learning. There is scope to make the feedback to students more specific, for example by indicating how the quality of a written answer could be improved upon or the level of detail required. An agreed policy in relation to the use of assessment for learning principles should be developed by the geography teaching team and should then be included in the subject department plan.

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management very effectively supports the work of the geography teaching team, particularly in relation to the provision of ICT resources.
- Time allocation for the subject across programmes is in line with syllabus recommendations and lessons are appropriately distributed across students' timetables.
- Students are provided with an open choice of subject for the established Leaving Certificate and the uptake of the subject is in a healthy state.
- Teachers have worked collaboratively and have produced a comprehensive subject department plan for Geography.
- Individual teachers had prepared very well for the lessons observed and this included, in most cases, a range of resources which were effectively used to support teaching and learning.
- Some very high quality teaching was evident in the classrooms visited, a notable feature of which was the effective use of ICT to stimulate students' interest and to engage them in the learning process.

- Classroom management was very effective in all of the lessons observed. A positive, mutually respectful and affirming classroom atmosphere was evident.
- Students are making very good progress in their courses and displayed a good grasp of both the subject content and geographical skills.
- Students maintains good records of their work and teachers use assessment for learning principles in providing feedback to students on their written work.
- The uptake of the higher level by students in the certificate examinations is very satisfactory and students are achieving well in these examinations.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that the planned teaching programme for first-year students should be revised.
- The planned programme for the TY module in Environmental and Social Studies should be reviewed so as to maintain a clear distinction between this programme and the content and methodology of the established Leaving Certificate and to provide students with a novel experience of the subject and to develop their investigative and research skills.
- Teachers should establish clear and precise learning outcomes in lesson plans and share these with students at the start of class.
- An agreed policy in relation to the use of assessment for learning principles should be developed by the geography teaching team and should then be included in the subject department plan.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with almost all of the the teachers of Geography and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.